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## Qohelet's Twists and Turns

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### Abstract

When Elias Bickerman wrote a little volume called *Four Strange Books of the Bible*, Ecclesiastes was an easy choice for inclusion. As he remarks, "Ecclesiastes has no known antecedents or spiritual posterity in Jewish thought."<sup>1</sup> This is an exaggeration,<sup>2</sup> but even Qohelet's successors, the Jewish sages of the rabbinic period, found Ecclesiastes questionably biblical. Thus in Leviticus Rabbah 28:1, R. Benjamin B. Levi remarks, "They sought to suppress Ecclesiastes, for they found in it matters that tend toward the heretical."<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this article is to highlight what I think is a particularly significant facet of Ecclesiastes' distinctive, and at first glance heretical, stance vis-à-vis the rest of biblical literature. This is Qohelet's emphasis on the imagery of turning.

### Disciplines

Biblical Studies | Jewish Studies

### Comments

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## Qohelet's Twists and Turns

by Michael Carasik

Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.

Immanuel Kant

When Elias Bickerman wrote a little volume called *Four Strange Books of the Bible*, Ecclesiastes was an easy choice for inclusion. As he remarks, "Ecclesiastes has no known antecedents or spiritual posterity in Jewish thought."<sup>1</sup> This is an exaggeration,<sup>2</sup> but even Qohelet's successors, the Jewish sages of the rabbinic period, found Ecclesiastes

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah / Daniel / Koheleth / Esther* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 142.

<sup>2</sup> As to its antecedents, the link with the Israelite wisdom tradition can certainly not be dismissed out of hand; and the comparison between (e.g.) Eccl 5:3 f. and Deut 23:22-24 shows that the author himself must have considered his work not completely a new thing; for an argument that on many "points of doctrine" Qohelet was squarely in "the central tradition of the Old Testament," see R. N. Whybray, "Conservatisme et Radicalisme dans Qohelet," in *Sagesse et Religion*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1979), 65-81. As to the book's possible "spiritual posterity," see A. P. Hayman, "Qohelet and the Book of Creation," *JSOT* 50 (1991): 93-111. One thinks also the the argument between the Houses of Hillel and Shammai that it would have been better for man not to have been created (*b. Erub.* 13b); cf. Eccl 4:2, 6:3, 7:1.

questionably biblical. Thus in Leviticus Rabbah 28:1, R. Benjamin b. Levi remarks, “They sought to suppress Ecclesiastes, for they found in it matters that tend toward the heretical.”<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this article is to highlight what I think is a particularly significant facet of Ecclesiastes’ distinctive, and at first glance heretical, stance vis-à-vis the rest of biblical literature. This is Qohelet’s emphasis on the imagery of turning.<sup>4</sup>

One does not have to be a biblical scholar in order to notice this emphasis. Pete Seeger found it so obvious that he gave the name “Turn, Turn, Turn” to the song he made out of Ecclesiastes 3. The fact that he did so makes a nice point, since explicit vocabulary of turning is entirely absent from Eccl 3:1-8, which provide the lyrics for the song. Rather, it is the alternation of the appropriate times for birth and death, killing and healing, and so forth, which demonstrate that the repetitiveness of circularity is an essential feature of the world.<sup>5</sup> It is a general theme of wisdom literature to point out that

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<sup>3</sup> *B. Šabb.* 30b similarly describes an attempt to suppress the book, but on the grounds that it was internally contradictory. Nonetheless, what “saved” the book in this latter instance was that “its beginning is words of Torah and its end is words of Torah,” implying that the rest of the book is questionably “words of Torah.” In fact, even the “beginning” (1:3) must be interpreted midrashically to support the assertion.

<sup>4</sup> I use Ecclesiastes here to refer to the book, Qohelet to refer to its author or, more precisely, to the first-person voice of the book.

<sup>5</sup> As Michael Fox observes, “The fact that ‘everything has a time’ ... means that ‘everything’—every type of event—will occur and recur.” Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, Bible and Literature Series 18 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 102. This understanding of Ecclesiastes 3 is common; the circularity of a verse like 11:1,

there is a proper time for every action, which the sage will seek to understand; only Qohelet goes so far as to point out that this says something about the nature of the world: its path is a circle, not a straight line.

Our discussion will follow a similar path. We will first examine turning as a phenomenon of Qohelet's thought and see how this is reflected in his writing. We will then turn to a discussion of straightness and directness and their high valuation in most other biblical texts. We will focus particularly on how straightness is valued as a quality of mind. Returning to Ecclesiastes, we will see, following some observations made in rabbinic literature, that turning, circularity, and backtracking are characteristic not merely of *what* Qohelet thought, but of *how* he thought.

#### *Qohelet on Turning and Returning*

That “turning” is the way of the world, and indeed of life on earth, is made explicit in the famous passage at the beginning of the book:

דור הלך ודור בא...  
 וזרח השמש ובא השמש...  
 הולך אל־דרום ומובב אל־צפון  
 מובב מבב הולך הרוח  
 ועל־מביתיו שב הרוח

A generation goes, a generation comes ...

The sun rises, the sun sets ...

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“Send forth your bread upon the water, for after many days you will find it,” is less often remarked upon.

Going to the south and circling around to the north<sup>6</sup>

Circling, circling, goes the wind

And the wind returns upon its circlings

Eccl 1:4-6

Even v. 7 here, which pictures streams flowing continuously into the sea but does not quite set up the second half of the cycle, in which the water from the sea circles back as rain to the sources of the streams, still insists on using the word “return,” שָׁבִים: “To the place where the streams go, there they keep returning.”<sup>7</sup> Contrast Isa 55:10, where “rain and snow fall from the sky but do not return there.”

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<sup>6</sup>Charles Whitley says that the Targum and Vulgate “rightly” take these words with the sun, not the wind; (Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought*, BZAW 148 [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979], 9), but the view that “the sun” is really the subject of these words has found little agreement. (For discussion of the Targum’s interpretation and its role in rabbinic understandings of the verse, see Peter S. Knobel, “The Targum of Qohelet,” in *The Aramaic Bible* 15 [Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991], 21 n. 8.) Edwin Good observes that, while “the wind” is the correct grammatical subject of the phrase, the introduction of the word is deliberately delayed to mislead the reader (Edwin M. Good, “The Unfilled Sea: Style and Meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:2-11,” in *Israelite Wisdom* (Samuel Terrien Festschrift), ed. John G. Gammie et al. (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978), 59-73, at 66 f.

<sup>7</sup>Symmachus and the Targum do set up the cycle; see C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 108.

As Choon-Leong Seow has pointed out, this image is recalled, with the specific words **שׁב הַרוּחַ** of 1:6, at the end of the book: “And the dust returns to the earth which it had been, and the spirit returns (**וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב**) to God who gave it” (12:7). Here the **רוּחַ** of nature, which circles the globe as wind, has become the metaphysical **רוּחַ** which animates the body, runs its course, and returns to its source.<sup>8</sup> Note that it is not merely the **רוּחַ** but “returning” itself which returns here at the end of the book. That this is no coincidence is confirmed by the following verse, where the words that begin the book are now used again to end it: **הַכֹּל הַבֹּלֵב הַבֹּלֵב הַבֹּלֵב אָמַר הַקְהֵלֶת** (1:2, 12:8).<sup>9</sup> I would like to suggest that this recurrence is not merely for stylistic reasons, but is intended to alert the reader, if only in subliminal fashion, to the repetitiveness and circularity which, in Qohelet’s view, characterize the world.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Did Qohelet believe in reincarnation?

<sup>9</sup> Despite the intrusion of the third-person voice in these verses, it is clear that they begin and end the first-person recital sandwiched in between the heading of 1:1 and the epilogue of 12:9-14.

<sup>10</sup> There have been other descriptions of how Qohelet’s style aids his message, most notably Good, “The Unfilled Sea,” and Hans-Friedemann Richter, “Kohelet—Philosoph und Poet,” in A. Schoors (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, BETL 136 (Leuven: Peeters/Leuven University Press, 1998), 435-449, both concentrating on 1:2-11. James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 36, hints at the possibility but his discussion does not take this path.

*Turning and Returning as an Aspect of Qohelet's Style*

There are other aspects of Qohelet's style which I believe also serve the deliberate purpose of reflecting the world's inherent circularity in the literary form of the book. We have one before us here in vv. 1:2 and 12:8 with the phrase **הבל הבלים**. This particular syntax is of course a standard BH way of expressing the superlative,<sup>11</sup> and it certainly fulfills that function here—everything is not merely **הבל**, but **הבל** to the *n*th degree. Nonetheless, beyond its meaning, its effect is one of repetition—indeed, in 1:2, a five-fold repetition. The way the book circles between two repetitions of this verse is mimicked by the way the words of the verse, and the beginning phrase itself, circle around the key concept of the book: **הבל**.<sup>12</sup> (One wonders whether the failure to repeat **הבל הבל** in 12:8 is not meant to suggest the effects of entropy, a certain “leakage” as the cycle proceeds.)

Qohelet's repetitiveness is evident, too, in the repeated occurrence of phrases that use a verb and noun from the same root, as in 2:11, **שעשו ידי כל-מעשי**, “all the doings that my hands did,” and **עמל שעמלתי**, “the toil that I toiled.” Again, this is an

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<sup>11</sup> GKC 133i.

<sup>12</sup> A similar effect can be found in Cant 2:10 and 13 where the verse which clues the reader into the chiasmic structure of this section itself has a chiasmic structure and includes, in its final phrase **לכי-לך**, still a third repetition.



idiom much more natural to Hebrew than it is to English,<sup>13</sup> yet one feels that Qohelet overuses it, again with the deliberate intent of letting his style embody his theme. I count some two dozen examples of this within the space of Qohelet's 222 verses, not including such instances as the three-fold repetition of "doing" and "deed" (לַעֲשׂוֹת, עֲשֵׂה, and מַעֲשֵׂה) in 9:10 or such phrases as וּגְבוּהִים עֲלֵיהֶם גְּבוּהַ מֵעַל גְּבוּהַ שְׁמֹר, "one high is watched by one higher, and there are higher ones still over them" (5:7). The comparison of the latter phrase with *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes* of Juvenal is instructive. Qohelet is not interested in the problem, merely in setting up the recurrent image.

I would go so far as to point out a few examples where Qohelet's notion of circularity and repetitiveness is played out stylistically in sound. One hesitates to call it "rhyme," since this is an effect that is to some extent culture-specific.<sup>14</sup> Yet it is clear

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<sup>13</sup> GKC 117p-r, Joüon 125p-t, Waltke-O'Connor 10.2.1 f-g. I have not been able to find any statistics on the frequency of this syntactical phenomenon (sometimes called the "cognate accusative," though I am referring to a more general phenomenon than is precisely described by this phrase). Thanks to Chris Rollston and other correspondents of the "Miqrā" e-mail list for giving me the name of this construction.

<sup>14</sup> Hrushovski describes the existence of rhyme in the Bible as "sporadic" (Benjamin Hrushovski, "Note on the Systems of Hebrew Versification," *Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, ed. T. Carmi [Philadelphia: Penguin/Jewish Publication Society, 1981], 71). See the discussion in James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 233-51, which mentions a work on Psalms dating to 1755 where "the whole idea of rhyme in the Bible was dismissed as

that one senses a certain recurrence of sound in phrases like those that make up the saying of 10:11, הַנַּחֵשׁ בְּלוֹא־לַחֵשׁ וְאֵין יִתְרוֹן לְבַעַל הַלְשׁוֹן אִם־יִשְׁךָ, and in the parallel of בַּעַל הַכְּנָפִים and הַשָּׁמַיִם עוֹף in 10:20. The same applies to such phrases as מֵר מַמּוֹת of 7:26. Note especially כָּל־נַחְלִים הֹלְכִים, “all the streams go,” of 1:7, where one would have expected נְהַרֹת, “rivers,” for נַחְלִים, “streams.”<sup>15</sup>

The combination יֵשׁ רַעְיָה אֲשֶׁר רֵאִיתִי (6:1), a kind of pseudo-cognate accusative

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‘evidently fantastical,’ and rightly so” (250). For a more general discussion, see *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), s.v. *rhyme*, esp. 235.

<sup>15</sup> Most likely the same deliberate emphasis on repetition, here bot in sound and substance, led to אֶלֶף שָׁנִים פַּעַמִּים, “a thousand years twice over” (6:6), rather than a simple שְׁנַיִם אֲלָפִים, “two thousand years.” Another example may be provided by “Better a full hand (מִלֵּא כַף) of ease than two handfuls (מִלֵּא חֲפָנִים) of toil and chasing after wind” (4:6), where the first מִלֵּא somewhat dulls the point of the expression, but reinforces the repetitive music of Qohelet’s language. The same is no doubt true of עֲצֵלְתַיִם, “double laziness” (10:18; NJPS “lazy hands”), which “appears to be dual ... but for no obvious reason” (Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought*, BZAW 148 [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979], 89).

(by homonymy), belongs in this category as well.<sup>16</sup> Then there are the straightforward repetitions, like **עמק עמק**, “deep, deep” (7:24) or such longer ones as **הרשע ומקום** **הצדק שמה הרשע מקום המשפט שמה**, “where there is justice there is wickedness, where there is righteousness there is wickedness” (3:16). All these assonances are a kind of recurring chime that sounds a repeated note. Perhaps the cleverest such sound-play—one that could hardly be inadvertent—is **טוב שם משמן** **טוב** of 7:1.<sup>17</sup> This is not merely gnomic, it is palindromic. As surely as in the phrases **דור הלך ודור בא** or **וזרח השמש ובא השמש**, the course of the phrase bears the reader or listener right back to where he started. Here, style and theme match in a circular scheme.<sup>18</sup>

A final stylistic feature which seems to me a deliberate reflection of Qohelet’s theme is his well-known penchant for using certain words and phrases over and over and

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<sup>16</sup> Also 5:12 and 10:5 and, more subtly, 7:14.

<sup>17</sup> Note that the **–מ** of **משמן** is an elision of **מן**, which only increases the effect.

<sup>18</sup> Richter, “Kohelet—Philosoph und Poet,” finds a number of such occurrences in the early verses about the cycles of nature where soundplay points to circularity. One might point also to **מה שהיה הוא שיהיה**, “what was is what will be,” of 1:9, where again the sound confirms the sense. Another almost palindromic soundplay can be found in the words **מה היה שהימים** of 7:10.

over again: הבל and עמל, רעות-רוח, and תחת השמש.<sup>19</sup> As Qohelet himself says,

כל הדברים יגעים (1:8). All these words are tiresome.<sup>20</sup> The irony, of course, is that

as a result of this excess of words, לא-יוכל איש לדבר, “one can’t say anything.”

This same impatience, one feels, is reflected as well in Qohelet’s repetition of the

rhetorical questions מיה (18 times)<sup>21</sup> and מי (17 times): לאדם מי-יודע מה-טוב ,

“who knows what is good for a person?” (6:12).

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<sup>19</sup> See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 36, for others.

<sup>20</sup> The transitive aspect of the word יגעים, though widely accepted, is a bit troublesome by comparison with the two other biblical uses of the word, Deut 25:18 and 2 Sam 17:2, where it means “weary.” Thus Whybray’s suggestion that it “probably means ‘all things are in constant activity’,” from יגיע, “effort or the result of effort” (R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth as a Theologian,” in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, 239-265, at 249).

Whitley, *Language and Thought* (ad loc.), solves the problem by assuming a מ lost by haplography from original מיגיעים, a (transitive) Piel. But Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 109, thinks the distinction is merely an inner-English problem, offering the stative/transitive example of מלא. He points also to the transitive יגעת בשר, “wearying of the flesh,” of Eccl 12:12.

<sup>21</sup> I do not count in the total six occurrences of מה-ש, where מה is the relative pronoun: 1:9 (twice), 3:15, 3:22, 6:10, 7:24. Good, “Unfilled Sea,” 70, takes these forms

At this point one might be tempted to agree with Tom Lehrer's witticism that "If someone can't communicate, the very least he can do is to shut up." But Qohelet's message is not merely that effort is futile—it would be foolish to make the effort to communicate this—but that futility is intrinsic to a world in which circularity is the norm. Perhaps the strangest thing about this strange book of the Bible is that even Qohelet's path to this conclusion is a roundabout and not a direct one. If we look for a moment at the biblical background, we will see that it is just this that makes Qohelet look heretical.

*Straightness as a Theme and a Value in the Bible*

The rest of the Bible naturally does not deny the kind of patterning that, as Qohelet saw, is intrinsic to the world. One thinks immediately of God's promise after the flood that the rhythms of life, "seed-time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night" (Gen 8:22), will never again be interrupted. From the perspective of society, one sees this in the remark that Samuel, like the circuit-riding judges of our own history, סבב, "made the rounds" of Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah שנה בשנה, "year after year" (1 Sam 7:16). Yet the circularity of nature or of society is not a biblical theme. When the מועדים, the "set times" of the Israelite calendar, are listed in Leviticus 23 or

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as questions also. Izak Spangenberg points to "[t]he number of rhetorical questions in the book ... as an indication of Socratic irony" ("Irony in the Book of Qohelet," *JSOT* 72 [1996]:57-69, at 61). Irony, as a kind of indirection, represents another aspect of turning in Qohelet's style.

Numbers 28-29, they are listed from A to Z<sup>22</sup>, not from A all the way back around the year to A again. Even in Genesis 1, with its thematic repetition of the alternation of evening and morning that makes up each new day, it is not the cyclic nature of this phenomenon which is highlighted. Instead, there is a direct, taxonomical progression to that day on which creation is complete and God rests. Obviously on the eighth day the cycle of the week started all over again, but this is not the point of the story. The one deliberately cyclical pattern one finds in the Bible outside of Ecclesiastes makes the point: It is the dead-end cycle of apostasy, oppression, return, and redemption (followed by renewed apostasy) which characterizes the period of the judges as presented in the Deuteronomistic History. This cycle is not even natural, let alone inevitable; it is a sign of the Israelites' moral failure.

In fact, it is directness that is both the more common motif and the more praiseworthy quality in the Bible outside the Book of Ecclesiastes. The path of etymology that traces the word "error" back to a Latin root that means "to wander" provides an image that is pervasive in the Hebrew Bible as well. Conversely, biblical texts regularly emphasize following the straight path that is marked out by God's teachings. Just as in English, "straightness" is prized as "right" and "crookedness" scorned as perverse.<sup>23</sup> One keeps out of trouble by keeping to "the straight and narrow."

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<sup>22</sup> Both texts begin their sequence with the holidays of the first month and end with those of the seventh month. Deut 16:1-17 and Exod 23:14-17 follow this same sequence without offering the dates.

<sup>23</sup> See S. Z. Loewenstamm, "Notes on the History of Biblical Phraseology," in *Comparative studies in Biblical and ancient Oriental literatures*, AOAT 204 (Kevelaer : Butzon and Bercker ; Neukirchen-Vluyn : Neukirchener Verlag, 1980), 211-14.

When one “turns,” it is only to avoid the path of evil and to return to the straight path of righteousness. The decent Israelite turns neither to the right nor to the left, but follows a prescribed, and presumably straight, path. Thus Deut 17:20, **ימין ושמאל**,

**לבלתי סור מן-המצוה**, “That he not swerve right or left from the commandment.”

One sees this in subtler ways as well. For example, four of the roots which Biblical Hebrew uses for “teaching”—**למד**, **אלף**, **יסר** and **הורה**—all have usages which imply that education means restriction to a particular course of action.<sup>24</sup> The former three roots are all used to refer to animal training,<sup>25</sup> a strict regime of control within boundaries. **הורה** does not share this connotation; it does, however, often occur in conjunction with the wisdom motif of the path or way. Following the straight and narrow path is, of course, the self-imposed restraint which one who is wise imposes on his or her own actions. One-third of the occurrences of **הורה** meaning “teach” or “instruct” have some indication of this sense of restriction as part of the meaning of the

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<sup>24</sup> For fuller discussion, see Michael Carasik, “Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel” (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1996), 53-63, esp. 58-61.

<sup>25</sup> For **למד**, Jud 3:31, Jer 2:24 and 31:18, Hos 10:11; for **אלף**, the noun **אלפיף** in Deut 7:13 and 28:4, 18 and 51, Isa 30:24, Ps 8:8, and Prov 14:4 and the adjective **אלוף**, “domesticated,” in Jer 11:19 and Ps 144:14; for **יסר**, Jer 31:18 again.

verb.<sup>26</sup> Prov 22:6, with still a fifth verb, **הֲנִיךְ**, makes this idea explicit: “Train a lad in the way he ought to go; He will not swerve from it.”<sup>27</sup>

As one might expect, this notion of the “straight path” of righteousness is central to the Book of Proverbs. The word **דֶּרֶךְ** occurs there 75 times, 10.6% of the 706 biblical occurrences of the word, and another half-dozen synonyms for “path” occur there as well. Though the vocabulary is less concentrated, the same notion is evident in Deuteronomy. What is the prophet of Deut 13:2-6 doing, when he suggests worshipping other gods? He is trying **לְהַדְיִיחַךְ מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לָלֶכֶת בָּהּ**, “to drive you off the path which the LORD your God commanded you to follow” (v. 6).

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<sup>26</sup>I use the list of Even-Shoshan, s.v. **יָרָה**,<sup>2</sup> who separates these occurrences from those meaning “shoot” or “rain.” He lists 48 occurrences, of which 12 have the word **דֶּרֶךְ** explicitly (1 Sam 12:23; 1 Kgs 8:36 = 2 Chr 6:27; Ps 25:8 and 12, 27:11 = 86:11, 32:8 and 119:33; Prov 4:11; and Isa 2:3 = Mic 4:2). Four others express the notion but without using **דֶּרֶךְ**: Gen 46:28 (showing the way to Goshen, a non-metaphorical use), 2 Kgs 12:3 (where the behavior Jehoiada taught Jehoash is called **יָשָׁר**, “straight”), Isa 28:26 (parallel to **יָסַר**) and Ps 119:102 (“I have not swerved [**לֹא־סָרְתִי**] from your statutes, for you have instructed me”).

<sup>27</sup>NJPS translation. The usage continues in rabbinic Hebrew; Jastrow, s.v. **הֲנִיךְ**, cites examples of training a child (*t. Yoma* 4:2).



A common biblical metaphor extends the straightness of the path marked out by God's teachings to the organ that prompts humanity to follow them: the mind or, in Biblical Hebrew, the "heart." Thus one finds praise for a quality called **יושר-לב**, "uprightness,"<sup>28</sup> and upright people being described as "straight of heart."<sup>29</sup> Against this, naturally, Ps 125:5 contrasts **עקלקלותם**, "their crookedness," and this too may be applied to the heart, as in the phrases "a twisted heart [**לבב עקש**]" (Ps 101:4) and "the twisted of heart [**לב עקשי**]" (Prov 11:20 and 17:20).

The "twisted" mind of the Bible, though, is not a mind that *cannot* think straight, as the word implies in English. Rather, it is a mind that is deliberately convoluted. Such mental complexity was looked on in ancient Israel with suspicion. The deceitful person speaks, as in Ps 12:3, **בלב ולב**, "with a heart and a heart": one heart that is hidden, and a second, false heart which he shows to the world.<sup>30</sup> Thus Delilah accuses Samson of saying that he loves her when "your heart is not with me [**ולבך אין אתן**]" (Jud 16:15);

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<sup>28</sup> Deut 9:5, Ps 119:7, Job 33:3 and 1 Chr 29:17.

<sup>29</sup> 2 Chr 29:34 and Pss 7:11, 11:2, 32:11, 36:11, 64:11, 94:15, 97:11 and 125:4.

<sup>30</sup> Compare the **ואבן ואבן** and **ואיפה ואיפה** of Deut 25:13 f., where the more advantageous measure is deployed and the other hidden; I owe the comparison to F. Nötscher (presumably *Die Psalmen*, Die Heil. Schr. in deutscher Übersetzung, Die Echter-Bible [1947]), cited by Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 209.

he has not revealed his mind to her but has lied instead. His response, at last, is to tell her “all of his heart [נאת-כל-לבו]” (v. 17).<sup>31</sup>

English usage leads us to expect what comes *from* the heart to be, like the conscience, an impulse that springs from one’s “better nature.” But in the Bible, something that comes *from* someone’s heart is invariably described that way to indicate that it was an invention without basis in reality. In particular, this idiom expresses a contrast between the invention of a human heart and something that was put into that heart by God. Thus, in Isa 59:13, lies (דברי-שקר) are said to be conceived and uttered (הרו והגו) מלב, “from the heart.” In like fashion, Moses assures the Israelites, “The LORD sent me to do all these things, it was not from my own heart [מלבי]” (Num 16:28), and Balaam reminds Balak, “I cannot cross the word of the LORD, for good or for bad, from my own heart [מלבי]; whatever the LORD speaks is what I will speak” (Num 24:13). Similarly, Nehemiah writes to Sanballat, “None of these things you are saying are so—you are inventing them from your own heart [מלבך]” (Neh 6:8); Jeroboam devises a brand-new festival “from his heart [מלבו<sup>32</sup>]” (1 Kgs 12:33); and Ezekiel

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<sup>31</sup>See also Prov 23:7, “‘Eat and drink,’ he tells you, but his heart is not with you

[ולבו בל-עמך].”

<sup>32</sup>This reading follows the Qere. This verse and Neh 6:8 are the only biblical occurrences of בדא, so it is not impossible that מלבו is a late reading influenced by Neh 6:8. But

describes false prophets as those who prophesy “from their own hearts” (מַלְבָּם, Ezek 13:2; מַלְבֵּהֶן, Ezek 13:17). Only in the wisdom text of Job 8:10 does Bildad seem to suggest that Job let “the previous generation” and “their ancestors” (v. 8) “teach you, speak to you, bring forth words from their heart”; perhaps for this reason, NJPS at Eccl 5:1 identifies Job 8:10 as a locus where לֵב refers to the organ of speech.<sup>33</sup> As Lam 3:33 tells us, even God does not afflict humankind מַלְבּוֹ (NRSV, “willingly”; AB, “deliberately”).<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the sages of Genesis Rabbah point out—in an observation that will at last bring us back to Qohelet—that Biblical Hebrew has two different expressions to describe private thought: speaking “to” one’s heart, and speaking “in” one’s heart.<sup>35</sup> I would

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the Ketiv מַלְבֵּד is so difficult that it is rejected by most translators (but cf. NRSV “he alone”).

<sup>33</sup> Compare מַלְבָּם יוֹצְאוֹ מִלִּיּוֹם with מִלֵּין מִפִּיךָ מִהַצֵּאת of Job 15:13. At Job 8:10, however, NJPS translates “understanding.” The discrepancy suggests a need for thorough source analysis of the NJPS.

<sup>34</sup> Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations*, AB (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), 51.

The other biblical occurrences of מַלְבֵּד refer to removal of something from the heart, either physically (2 Kgs 9:24) or metaphorically (Deut 4:9, Ps 31:13, Eccl 11:10).

<sup>35</sup> *Gen. Rab.* 67:8 implies that speaking “to” the heart indicates control over it and that speaking “in” the heart indicates yielding to its control.

sharpen this observation to say that biblical narrative always uses the expression “to say in one’s heart” as a mark of something wrong: from Abraham’s doubts about God’s promise of a son in Genesis 17, through Jeroboam’s plan to set up false worship in 1 Kings 12, to Esau’s decision to murder Jacob in Genesis 27.<sup>36</sup> A reader of the Bible who sees the idiom **בלב אמר** is alerted to the fact that the thinker is hiding something dastardly in his private thoughts.

*Turning and Returning as a Characteristic of Qohelet’s Method of Thought*

All this being the case, then Ecclesiastes presents us with an example that indeed requires some thought. Let us begin with Eccl 2:1, where Qohelet calmly levels the accusation of private thinking at himself: **בלבי אמרתי אני**, “I said in my heart.” Ecclesiastes is certainly a strange book, but this is a very strange thing to say. The idiom “he said in his heart” carries its negative connotations specifically because of the element of concealment involved. When the thinker himself reveals his private thought, however, the accusation loses a certain amount of its force. Yet Qohelet’s use of the phrase is indeed significant.

In the narratives where this idiom appears, its context is the attempt of a character in a story to conceal his thoughts from others. None of those texts has any explicit interest in the workings of the mind. But just this is part of Qohelet’s authorial purpose. In 2:1, the phrase introduces Qohelet’s decision to pursue pleasure—not a devil-may-care lifestyle choice but, as the chapter division recognizes, the first step in his quest for

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<sup>36</sup> For fuller discussion, see Carasik, “Theologies of the Mind,” 138-41.

understanding.<sup>37</sup> That this is the true theme of the book emerges after the prologue, when Qohelet introduces himself as one who has been king over Israel in Jerusalem and then announces, **נעשה תחת השמים ונתתי את-לבי לדרוש ולתור בחכמה**, על כל-אשר done under heaven.” As Peter Machinist and Michael Fox have pointed out, what Qohelet is saying here is not that he is seeking wisdom, but that he is using wisdom—what we might call “critical thinking”—as a tool with which to gain understanding.<sup>38</sup> In effect, just as the phrase **אמרתי אני בלבי** implies, he is laying bare the workings of his own mind. Qohelet’s apparent purpose is not merely to present his findings, but to let us see the gears turning.

And turning, to return to the theme of this article, is indeed essential to Qohelet’s image of the mechanism of thought. One must follow not the straight and narrow path suggested by the sages of Proverbs, but must turn and turn again, following the long and winding road mapped out by one’s own imagination. If you seek true understanding, according to Qohelet, you cannot march. You must meander.

We have mentioned that Qohelet’s reiteration of terms is a stylistic feature corresponding to his theme. One such repeated term is the one by which Qohelet works out the successive steps on his path to understanding, the verb **ראה**, “to see,” which he

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<sup>37</sup> Fox, *Contradictions*, 87, refers to this as a deliberately chosen “heuristic procedure.”

<sup>38</sup> See Fox, *Contradictions*, 80, and Peter Machinist, “Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought,” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots*, edited by Ziony Zevit et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 159-75.

uses 47 times, proportionately about three and one-half times as frequently as in the Bible as a whole. With rare exceptions (e.g, 1:8, where the eye seeing is linked with the ear hearing), what Qohelet uses this verb to mean is “realize.”<sup>39</sup> Frequently, Qohelet does not merely “realize,” but he “again” realizes or (literally) “returns” and realizes, using **שׁב** as an auxiliary verb.<sup>40</sup> The implication of this expression, I believe, is that one does not simply add information to an ever-growing pile of knowledge in one’s store, but that each fresh realization stems from a different *lack* of understanding. Qohelet’s description of his own path to knowledge makes clear that such a path is full of false starts. I can think of no other biblical text which expresses this view. Certainly it is contrary to the perspectives of Proverbs and Deuteronomy, in whose intellectual footsteps Ecclesiastes follows. Yet Qohelet returns to it again and again.

That this idiom of “turning and realizing” is not a frozen expression but a live metaphor for Qohelet is evident from the fact that **שׁב** is not the only verb he uses to

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<sup>39</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 121, notes that Qohelet uses **רָאָה** in 1:14 and frequently for “reflective observation”; For, *Contradictions*, 99 f., observes that the “immediate experience” of seeing (98 n. 25) is crucial to Qohelet’s epistemology: “In brief, if one could ask a more conventional sage, ‘How do you know this?’ he would, I believe, answer: ‘Because I learned it’. To this question Qohelet would reply: ‘Because I saw it’. The shift is profound.” Similarly Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 28. For more on seeing as an expression of understanding, see Carasik, “Theologies of the Mind,” 40-53.

<sup>40</sup> Eccl 4:1, 4:7, 9:11.

express it.<sup>41</sup> Thus in 2:11-12 he notes, **וּפְנִיתִי אֲנִי לְרֵאוֹת חִכְמָה וּפְנִיתִי אֲנִי בְכָל־**

... **מֵעֲשֵׂי שַׁעֲשׂוֹ יָדַי**. The “turning” aspect of **שׁוּב** is perhaps implicit (despite its

English translation “return”); not so with **פָּנָה**. Qohelet is literally turning his face

(**פְּנִים**) to see, as an outward sign that his attention is turned in a different direction.<sup>42</sup>

Even more explicit is 7:25, **יָדַי... וּפְנִיתִי אֲנִי לְרֵאוֹת חִכְמָה וּפְנִיתִי אֲנִי בְבַלִּי**,

**מֵעֲשֵׂי שַׁעֲשׂוֹ**: in Seow’s Anchor Bible translation, “I, that is, my heart, turned to know

and to explore.” Here Qohelet’s verb is **סָבַב**, the theme verb of the prologue and its

image of nature’s endless cycles.<sup>43</sup> It is clear that Qohelet’s path to wisdom is an indirect

one, involving constant changes in direction as one’s mind prompts one to explore this or that intellectual path.

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<sup>41</sup> The observation that the combination of **שׁוּב** + **רָאָה** is a hendiadys (so Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth: With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System*, *Studia Semitica Upsaliensia* 10 [Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987], 63, 67) does not negate the conclusion that **שׁוּב** is a live metaphor.

<sup>42</sup> Typically in Biblical Hebrew one “puts” (**שׁוּב**) or “gives” (**נָתַן**) one’s mind (**לֵב**) over to a subject.

<sup>43</sup> Does even the gemination of the root remind Qohelet of circularity, of the failure of this root to “go anywhere”?

This permitting one's mind to roam where it wishes is exactly the opposite of the mistrust, throughout the rest of the Bible, of the untrammelled power of the mind. This is expressed most sharply in the warning of Deuteronomy 29:17 f.:

פְּיִישׁ בְּכֶם אִישׁ אִו־אִשָּׁה אוּ מִשְׁפַּחַה אִו־שִׁבְטֵי אֲשֶׁר לָבְבוּ פָנָה הַיּוֹם מֵעִם  
ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ... וְהִתְבָּרַךְ בְּלִבְבוֹ לֵאמֹר שְׁלוֹם יִהְיֶה־לִּי כִּי בִשְׂרָרוֹת לִבִּי אֶלֶךְ

לְמַעַן סִפּוֹת הָרֹוּה אֶת־הַצְּמָאָה

“Lest there be among you a man or a woman, a clan or a tribe that is turning today from the LORD your God ... and he assure himself, *I will be all right, though I follow the dictates of my own heart*—sweeping away the wet with the dry!<sup>44</sup>” Even when the solemn covenant involving all of Israel took effect, there was no way but a threat to eliminate the possibility of someone having mental reservations about it. It was לֵב

שְׂרָרוֹת, too—reliance on the dictates of one's own heart—to which Jeremiah

objected,<sup>45</sup> prophesying instead the day when God's dictates would be written on the

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<sup>44</sup>BDB, s.v. סִפּוֹת, 705a, describes this as a proverbial expression. Conceivably it means

something like “throwing away the baby with the bath water,” though without the slightly comic overtones of the latter.

<sup>45</sup>Jer 3:17, 7:24, 9:13, 11:8, 13:10, 16:12, 18:12 and 23:17. On the meaning of the phrase

as “self-reliance,” see Aida Besançon Spencer, “שְׂרָרוֹת as Self-Reliance,” *JBL* 100

(1981): 247 f.; cf. Aaron Skaist, “The Background of the Talmudic Formula וְקִיָּם

וְהַכֵּל שְׂרִיר,” in *Studies in Hebrew and Semitic Languages*, ed. Gad B. Sarfatti et al.



heart indelibly, eliminating the possibility of independent thought in contravention of the covenant.

Again, it is precisely this attitude of reliance on one's own independent mind which, to the sages mentioned in *Leviticus Rabbah*, smacked of heresy:

Solomon ought to have said [only]: "Rejoice, young man [in your youth, and let your heart make you glad in your younger days]" (Eccl 11:9). Moses said: "Do not explore after your hearts and after your eyes [which you whore after]" (Num 15:39), and Solomon said, "Walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes"!<sup>46</sup>

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(Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1980), XLIV and n. 18, XL-LIV, and Marguerite Harl, "Le péché irrémédiable de l'idolâtre arrogant: Dt 29,19-20 dans la Septante et chez d'autres témoins," in *Tradition of the Text*, ed. Gerard J. Norton and Stephen Pisano, OBO 109 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1991), 66. The arguments of Elisha Qimron, "Biblical Philology and the Dead Sea Scrolls" (in Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 58 (1988-89): 313, that the equivalence to **מהשבה** in 1QS 1, 6 || CD 2, 16 demonstrates that **שרירות** merely means "thought" are not convincing, since **מהשבה**, too, is not simple "thought." In any case, the context, in Qimron's own words, is one of "the will of the human heart (as opposed to God's will)" (my translation).

<sup>46</sup> *Lev. Rab.* 28:1; similarly *Sifre Shelach* 9. See Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 24.

I agree with Michael Fox that Ecclesiastes is not a not a polemic against “wisdom or Wisdom Literature or a Wisdom School or the ‘received wisdom’,”<sup>47</sup> but I think too that this verse, Eccl 11:9, is, as Leviticus Rabba hints, the deliberate assertion of an intent to pursue wisdom using exactly the kind of mental freedom prohibited by the Numbers text<sup>48</sup>—the more so as Qohelet also employs just this verb **לְתוֹר**, “to explore,” in his description of his pursuit of wisdom: **וּנְתִי אֶת־לְבִי לְדְרוֹשׁ וּלְתוֹר בַּחֲכָמָה**, “I set my heart to seek and to explore with wisdom” (1:13).<sup>49</sup> The 13 uses of this verb in Numbers 13-15 (the narrative of the spies) are more than half of its 24 biblical occurrences; it is hard to imagine that the three occurrences in Ecclesiastes are mere coincidence. No, Qohelet’s path to wisdom is not merely different from that

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<sup>47</sup> Michael V. Fox, “The Inner-Structure of Qohelet’s Thought,” in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, 225-238, at 230.

<sup>48</sup> Note already the attempts of the Septuagint and the Targum to revise the advice of Eccl 11:9, given in such glaring contradiction of the Numbers verse. (On the Septuagint reading, see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 349 f.; Rahlfs’ edition cites the revisions as variants only.) Benjamin Sommer of Northwestern University suggests that the use of the Piel of **לְתוֹר** here may carry a frequentative meaning which would strengthen the point being made here (personal communication). I thank him for this and a number of other useful comments.

<sup>49</sup> Also 2:3 and 7:25.

recommended elsewhere in the Bible, it is very much its opposite—and consciously so.<sup>50</sup> We see now that Qohelet’s method in his pursuit of pleasure—“Everything that my eyes asked, I did not deny them, nor did I withhold any joy from my heart” (2:10)—was in fact a declaration of his intellectual independence. He deliberately refrains from preventing his eyes and heart from turning where they will.

Yet in his attitude toward the contrary paths of turning and of straightness, Qohelet is again a man of contradictions. In 7:29, “God has made humanity straight

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<sup>50</sup> The sentiment at the end of the controversial verse, 11:9b, “But know that God will bring you into judgment for all of these,” is identified as having saved Ecclesiastes from suppression. Ginsberg considers it “more probably an interpolation from the hand of the last epilogist” (H. L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth*, Texts and Studies 17 [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950], 5). T. A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 155, puts 9aα and 9b in the mouth of the orthodox “P,” 9ab in that of the radical “K.” In the context of our discussion, it is interesting that one recent commentator has identified 9b as having “aligned” (בִּישׁוּרֹן, from the root יָשַׁר) the beginning of the verse with a “Torah perspective.” See Raphael Breuer, *The Scroll of Ecclesiastes* (Jerusalem: Koren, 1995), 75 (in Hebrew). Though I am unaware of any explicit discussion in the literature of the phenomenon described in this study, figurative language describing Qohelet’s path as a departure from straightness is quite common. Thus Fox, *Contradictions*, 28, remarks on the “tremendous interpretive pressure to raise the valleys and lower the hills, to make the way straight and level before the reader.”

[ישר] but they have sought many reckonings [השבנות],”<sup>51</sup> he seems somewhat wistful for an original divine straightness which has somehow been spoiled by humanity. In 7:13, however, he places the responsibility for the difficulty of straightening things out in a perverted world on the one who created them that way: “Look at the work of God—for who can straighten what he made crooked?” Eccl 1:15 complains of the same difficulty but without naming the perpetrator of the crookedness. Could this be Qohelet’s clever warning about the curves and switchbacks the reader may expect to find in his own book?

One such switchback can be illustrated by Qohelet’s use of the verb תצא, “find,” to mean “understand.”<sup>52</sup> In the context of our discussion, we need to think of the aspect of this verb that means “to attain” (so BDB) or “reach” (as in Aramaic תצא).<sup>53</sup>

Understanding means finding something—reaching one’s goal. In 7:23-29, Qohelet employs his stylistic efforts in the service of his point that the goal is an elusive one. Note how exclamations about how difficult it is to find wisdom (e.g., 7:23, “who can find it?”) are interleaved with deceptively positive expressions like that of 7:26, where “I find” makes the reader anticipate an answer or a result, only to read, “I find woman more bitter than death.” What Qohelet is trying to show the reader—in a way perhaps meant to produce the same sort of frustration that he himself feels—is that even when the goal of

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<sup>51</sup> On the contrast of integral straightness with multiplicity, see Carasik, “Theologies of the Mind,” 128-30, 205-208.

<sup>52</sup> Fox, *Contradictions*, 107.

<sup>53</sup> So HALOT, s.v. תצא; similarly Ugaritic.

one's intellectual quest seems to be in sight, close enough to reach out and touch, it will slip through one's fingers. The goal can never be reached.

Fox's image is apt in this connection:

Qohelet, the archetypal wise man, is a Sisyphus, ever condemned to pushing a rock to the top of a mountain knowing that it will immediately roll back down.<sup>54</sup>

The limits of this image, however, are equally telling. Sisyphus—at least as I have always imagined him—pushes his rock straight up the slope; it rolls straight back down; and he commences rolling it straight back up the same path. Intellectually, Qohelet would not bother to give such a simpleton the time of day. He, too, fails over and over again to reach the top of the mountain—but each time by a different, circuitous route.

Indeed, the structure of Ecclesiastes shows that, in Qohelet's view, there is only one place which one can go straight to. Just as in the game of Monopoly the only way to stop going around in circles is to “Go directly to jail,” so too for Qohelet, the one direct path that life affords is that which we all eventually follow, to death: **ודעת והכמה**

**בשאול אשר אתה הלך שמה אין מעשה וחשבון**, “There is no deed or

accounting or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going” (9:10). This

explains, I think, why the book concludes with the famous allegory of death in 12:3-7.

Whether for the individual or for all of humanity,<sup>55</sup> the direct path, the straight way, leads

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 119; see the explicit discussion of “Qohelet and Camus” on 13-16 and passim.

<sup>55</sup> Thus Seow observes that “it is not merely the end of the human life span of which the author speaks, but the end of human life in general” (*Ecclesiastes*, AB, 53); see also Fox,

only and inevitably here. As Eccl 12:5 points out, the dead man “goes” (הלך) to his eternal home (the grave), while the mourners “mill about” (סבבו) in the street.<sup>56</sup> The stillbirth of 6:3, who may be considered better off than one who lives long enough to sire 100 children, is better off precisely because he has “short-circuited” the process, avoiding the tedious daily round that preoccupied the other for so long. Death is seen as real, but in all else, as 12:8 repeats: הקוהלת הכל הבל הבל הבלים אמר, “ ‘Utter illusion,’ says Qohelet, ‘all is illusion.’”

Even here, though, in what ought to have been the powerful conclusion to a work not only of existential but also of epistemological despair, we as readers are brought up short by one last twist. For with the words “says Qohelet” we are reminded that we have

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*Contradictions*, 290-94; and H. A. J. Kruger, “Old Age Frailty Versus Cosmic Deterioration? A Few Remarks on the Interpretation of Qohelet 11,7-12,8” in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, 399-411.

<sup>56</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 364, translates סבבו as “march” in a ritual procession; but the selection of verb cannot be accidental. Crenshaw’s “go about” (*Ecclesiastes*, 182) and Fox’s “walk about” (*Contradictions*, 306) capture the nuance, but neither remarks on the contrast. Mayer Gruber suggests that it refers to circumambulation of the bier, a custom which he finds also in the Mishnaic Hebrew לויה for a funeral (Mayer I. Gruber, “Ten Dance-Derived Expressions in the Hebrew Bible,” *Bib* 62 [1981]: 328-346, at 334 f.). Qohelet uses the root לוי in 8:15, but the context there does not suggest that he recognized a meaning of “circling” in this verb.

not been listening to a single voice directed straightforwardly at us, but to a *quoting* voice, the same one which introduced Qohelet's watchword to us in 1:2.<sup>57</sup> It is this quoting voice whose final "words of Torah" were enough to keep Ecclesiastes within the canon: "Fear God and keep his commandments."<sup>58</sup> It should occasion no surprise to find Qohelet's dangerous attitude toward the mind contradicted in this passage as well. Thus, the epilogist presents him as an exemplar of straightness:

- "Moreover, Qohelet was a sage.... he *straightened* [תקן] many proverbs"

(12:9). Even if this does mean "edited,"<sup>59</sup> we should recognize that the verb was deliberately chosen. It has Qohelet doing just what he insisted could not be done.

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<sup>57</sup> The words אמרה קהלת (or, as they are typically emended, הקהלת) in 7:27 are still unexplained; the emendation seems to have distracted attention from the problem. Even Michael V. Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83-106, who emphasizes the deliberate intrusion of the editorial voice here, does not explain why this *particular* verse has the insertion.

<sup>58</sup> It is less often noted that 12:12 is very much like the authentic Qohelet voice of 1:8, blurring the difference between the two voices. But see Fox, "Frame-Narrative," and J.-M. Auwers, "Problèmes d'Interprétation de l'Épilogue de *Qohèlèt*," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, 267-282, for the suggestion that (as Auwers puts it) the epilogist could be the real author of the book and Qohelet a purely fictive personage to whom the author shifts responsibility for his daring opinions.

<sup>59</sup> So Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 385, citing Jastrow's dictionary and an apparent usage in Sir 47:9 with the meaning of "arrange" (music). He notes also the clever pun of Perry, *Dialogues*, 172, "righting many proverbs."

- “Qohelet sought to find pleasing words and wrote<sup>60</sup> rightly [ישר] words of truth” (12:10). However this word is to be interpreted, it clearly innotes to Qohelet a directness that we have seen him avoid over and over again.

- “The words of the wise are like goads, like planted nails” (12:11). Here too, in addition to the “goads” that remind us of restriction to the legitimate path, calling the words of the sages “nails” gives them an aura of no-nonsense straightness which does not do justice to the words of Qohelet.

Finally, we note that the book’s real conclusion (12:14) is that God will pass judgment over “everything hidden [נעלם], whether good or evil.” Like the hidden thoughts (נסתרת) of Deut 29:28, which are left for God to deal with, here too we are assured that the secret thoughts that Qohelet spoke in his heart, following his own will wherever it might lead him, can never upset the order of God’s world. As in the case of a Cretan who tells you that all Cretans are liars, the reader is left with a biblical Catch-22. If the epilogist is being straight with us, then Qohelet’s twists and turns are the right way to see the world—and straightness is only an illusion.

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<sup>60</sup> As if כתוב were the infinitive absolute, not the passive participle; see Seow,

*Ecclesiastes*, 385.